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ABSTRACT

Despite suspicion in some quarters that refugee resettlement has been unduly expensive, evidence indicates that the Indochinese have made steady progress toward self-sufficiency. The majority of Hmong refugees in Providence, Rhode Island, for example, which has been "heavily impacted" by the large number of Indochinese who have become its newest residents, are self-supporting despite a high local unemployment rate. In Rhode Island as a whole, the unemployment rate of Indochinese is only 6.6 percent higher than that of other residents; several other States with high concentrations of refugees report similarly low dependency rates. Employers value the Indochinese' ability to meet production quotas and their disinterest in unions. Many refugees have started their own businesses and self-help groups. Crime continues to plague refugees no matter where they live, but efforts have been made in Portland, Oregon, and elsewhere to reduce language and other barriers between the Indochinese and vital emergency services. However, the Indochinese tend to remain isolated from the surrounding community whether it be a large or small one. (CJM)

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THE INDOCHINESE IN AMERICA:

PROGRESS TOWARDS SELF-SUFFICIENCY

John Finck

IN:

World Refugee Survey 1983

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The Indochinese in America: Progress Towards Self-Sufficiency

John Finck

When Congress, public and private agencies, and the American public consider the recent experience of domestic resettlement, they are confronted with the suspicion in some quarters that the program is unduly expensive, especially because of continuing welfare dependency among refugees. But the progress Indochinese refugees have made in communities around the country should not be ignored. It would be wise to look at cities and other areas where steady progress continues to be made towards integrating the Indochinese into the stream of American life.

Providence, Rhode Island, is one city recently determined to be "heavily impacted" by the large number of Indochinese who have become its newest residents. How has a New England industrial city with a per capita concentration of refugees as high as any city in California (the state with the largest Indochinese refugee population) managed its resettlement resources? How are the Indochinese, especially the Hmong, doing in terms of achieving self-sufficiency and finding a place in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial urban center?

Like other American cities, Providence is firmly locked in the jaws of the recession. The number of jobless has been at its highest level in more than 30 years; when adjusted for seasonal factors, the state's unemployment rate stood at 11.3 percent in January 1983. In the same month, the national unemployment rate was 10.4 percent.

Many Hmong resettled in Rhode Island have experienced successful assimilation. ELLEN KURAS

The refugees—whether from Cambodia, the Soviet Union, or Ethiopia—could not have chosen a bleaker moment to try to crack the job market. Despite the daunting statistics, however, the majority of refugees in Rhode Island are supported by paid employment. Of the state's 7,700 refugees, only 2,089 received assistance in January 1983, and one-third of this number were categorically eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, presumably not able to work because of incapacity, disability, or the absence of a parent. If the number of refugees eligible for AFDC is set aside from the number receiving assistance in Rhode Island, it leaves only 18 percent of refugee heads-of-household unemployed, an amazing accomplishment in the face of the local unemployment rate.

Taken as a whole, the Indochinese have only a 6.6 percent higher unemployment rate than other residents of Rhode Island. Some communities are doing even better. None of the 55 Hmong families in Fort Smith, Arkansas, receives welfare. Utah reports an 11 percent dependency rate, while in Arizona only 9 percent of the refugee population receives assistance. In the New England states, Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire also report low dependency rates.

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It comes as no surprise that, as a group, the Vietnamese move toward self-sufficiency more rapidly than other Indochinese groups. What amazes many observers in Providence is how the Hmong, who came to the West with the least preparation, have organized their community and encouraged one another to accept the realities of their new lives.

Many Hmong came to cities like Providence from refugee camps in Thailand, bringing farm equipment, expecting to plant rice and vegetables. One such Hmong, Moua Yang, a slender man of 25, spoke but a few words of English on the day of his arrival. His wife spoke even less. It was his grandfather who gave the young man and his family the emotional support to bear the early months. Moua, already the father of two, enrolled in an English as a Second Language class. At night, he tried to teach his children what he had learned by day. His son's first English word was "Pepsi." Encouraged by his grandfather, Moua found a job at a local wire company. He tried to study for his high school equivalency exam at night but found he could not concentrate after the long factory day. After six months on the job, he was laid off.

As for Moua, the greatest challenge facing the refugees, regardless of where they are living and the agencies which help them, is finding enough jobs. Once jobs are found, however, employers in Providence who have hired the Indochinese are enthusiastic about their performance. The Indochinese have had notable success in companies where piece-work is valued. In packing, assembling, cutting, grading, or polishing—jobs that require manual dexterity—the

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Indochinese have shown that they can meet or surpass production quotas. Employers also value the refugees' reluctance to participate in the formation of unions.

Cities with large refugee populations have experimented with innovations to encourage employers to hire Indochinese. In one promising strategy, the employer is asked to hire one experienced, bilingual refugee worker. If the individual "works out," the company is asked to hire other refugees who speak little English but who can be trained by the more experienced refugee who has already proven his or her value to the company.

In collaboration with the U.S. Catholic Conference, the Rhode Island state refugee coordinator has pursued another strategy. He has hired an actress to speak before companies who have yet to hire any Indochinese. Job opportunities sparked by these presentations will be referred to the employment office under contract to the state refugee program, which has a skills bank of all the refugees who are unemployed. There will also be presentations before local churches to ask not for another batch of clothes or load of used furniture, but for jobs for the refugees.

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Most Indochinese have turned to wage income for support. But a few brave souls have opened their own businesses. In Santa Ana, California, hundreds of Vietnamese-owned stores have opened in the last two years, offering every conceivable product or service. The number of stores and professional offices in that city now warrants a Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce. Nationally, many refugee-owned businesses have been financed within the ethnic communities that support them.

Even in a city as small as Providence, the Lao, Cambodians, and Hmong have opened stores in the past year. The Indochinese community includes a Cambodian jewelry repair store, a Cambodian ethnic-Chinese restaurant, a Lao restaurant, and a Hmong grocery store. Downtown, a group of Americans, aided by a $10,000 grant from a local foundation, opened a retail store to market Hmong textiles. Last year the store sold close to $50,000 worth of merchandise.

In most instances, refugee-owned businesses are opened without technical aid or assistance from Americans. When refugees have turned to the Small Business Administration for help, they have received numerous booklets, flyers, and pamphlets—but little practical advice. Refugees interested in agricultural work face similar problems. The Hmong community in Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, has purchased 240 acres of potentially arable land for $43,200 on a site 70 miles from the state capital. They plan to clear the land, but they have no tractor. They want to plant dry upland rice but do not know a supplier of seeds. The right kind of technical help on a local level could do much toward the development of this land into a profitable farm.

Nationwide, there is a growing awareness in Indochinese communities that they stand to benefit more from business advisors than from social workers. Some of the voluntary agencies have already recognized this need. Church World Service has raised over $1 million to purchase land outside of the Twin Cities, Minnesota, for a large farming project. Efforts like these generate hope among refugee communities that they are not destined to remain at minimum wage forever, boning chicken, scaling fish, or sweeping floors.

Moua enrolled in an English as a Second Language class. At night, he tried to teach his children what he had learned by day. His son's first English word was "Pepsi."

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Nearly all Indochinese regard education as their way out of the "poor people's melting pot." In all of their cultures, teachers are revered and respected, and education is valued even in families where the parents cannot read or write. American high school teachers have been surprised when Indochinese parents have asked them to be tougher with their children, who excel in math, enjoy science, and struggle with English. In Dallas, Hmong teenagers have formed a homework club that meets each week for practice and review sessions. They have invited college admissions officers to meetings to seek their advice on getting into college.

These and other special groups the Indochinese have organized in their own communities help to keep teenagers in high school with hope for the future. Some groups were started as refugee leaders realized that large numbers of girls were leaving high school to get married. Estimates in Providence range from 75 to 90 percent of the teenage Hmong girls who begin their adult lives with children and no high school diploma. Although early marriage is culturally sanctioned, it greatly concerns ethnic leaders who want their people to break out of the poverty cycle.

Among adults, men often begin their English language training with the advantage of some prior schooling, but the women have proven eager students. In some cases, they have overtaken their husbands in conversational abilities because they are more willing to make the mistakes that learning a new and difficult language requires and to initiate conversations with Americans. In cities like Providence, where more Indochinese women than men are employed, the requirement of speaking English in the workplace gives the women extra practice.

Special learning opportunities occasionally open for the Indochinese. Last year in Providence, a private foundation made an unsolicited grant of $100,000 to a local church for the purpose of opening a school to teach basic English to Indochinese widows and widowers. The school opened last fall, enrolling 100 adults, many of whom had never been to school before. Although these adults are enthusiastic students, their progress has been slow and painful. For them, even learning how and where to wait for their school bus each morning required dealing with such concepts as telling time, punctuality, and repetition of an activity on a daily basis. They had to learn proper dress for winter mornings and to be confident that the bus will come, even if it is late.

For many of the older Indochinese women, going to school on their own is a remarkable departure from their past. Making decisions outside of the home, away from their husbands, in a classroom setting, is without precedent. Some will learn, but others will not. The non-learners will need the protection of their families and will probably never become wage-earning Americans. But even for them, through programs like this and others around the country, such valuable survival skills as safety, sanitation, protection from crime, and the rights of tenants are being taught and learned.

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Crime continues to plague refugees, no matter where they live. In early 1983, the *New York Times* reported that 22 major crimes, not including muggings, were committed against 150 Cambodians living in a small area in Brooklyn during a six-month period. Finally, the Cambodians were evacuated to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, by World Relief, a voluntary agency.

In Providence, an arsonist robbed a Cambodian family and burned their house as they watched. The incident was reported in the local newspaper, resulting in hundreds of dollars of contributions to the displaced family.

Unreported are the daily break-ins, the harassments, and verbal abuse that refugees endure as they walk to school or the grocery store. Many families in Providence are afraid to leave their homes unattended. Cambodian and Hmong leaders believe their people are singled out for attack, although the police say that the refugees live in a high crime area where everyone is at equal risk.

Although language barriers often prevent refugees from reporting crimes in progress, police departments across the country have not shown great zeal in hiring bilingual staff, thereby compromising their ability to investigate complaints filed by the Indochinese. Although the Providence

In Providence, Rhode Island, 350 Hmong families cultivate a communal seven-acre garden. JOHN FINCK

police have not added any Indochinese to their staff yet, the department's ranking officers recognize the communication barriers and have shown genuine interest in providing more effective police intervention.

The city of Portland, Oregon, has devised a temporary measure to reduce some of the barriers between the Indochinese and such vital emergency services as police and fire protection. In that city, anyone, American or Indochinese, may call a special number, 24 hours a day, that will put them directly in touch with an emergency interpreter at the refugee office. After working hours, a switchboard immediately connects the caller, via a conference call, to a bilingual interpreter at his or her home. Thus, refugees in Portland have a go-between for quick exchange of emergency information. Cities with large numbers of limited-English speaking refugees can easily replicate this three-way method of linking callers to interpreters.

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Regardless of whether the Indochinese live in small cities or large ones, they tend to be isolated from the surrounding community. Many Lao, Cambodian, Hmong, and Vietnamese adults seldom talk to an American other than their sponsor, a teacher, or a doctor, and even that is often through an interpreter. Because the refugees have not become well integrated into their American communities, many Americans have little idea of who they are, where they came from, or how they are doing. With few exceptions, Indochinese leaders are reluctant to stand up before the local Rotary or Lions Clubs to tell their stories. In many communities, the Indochinese have avoided establishing contact with the press and do not yet see the media as a way of building public support for their presence.

At the same time, many refugee families say they would like to have American friends but do not know how to begin these relationships. They worry, especially, that their limited English will make it impossible to talk with Americans. A program to reduce cultural isolation called "Family to Family" has been organized by a number of churches in Providence. The program links Americans who would like to meet an Indochinese family with a Hmong or Lao or Cambodian family. After the Americans receive some initial orientation, the program sponsors events such as a traditional Thanksgiving dinner or, in the summer, a picnic, where Indochinese and Americans can meet each other in an informal setting, with the expectation that each family will later invite the other to their home. Because "Family to Family" is based on reciprocal relationships, it differs dramatically from traditional refugee sponsorship. The program costs nothing and, in Providence, has become an educational experience for all concerned.

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An estimated 600,000 Indochinese have taken their places beside other immigrant and refugee groups in hundreds of communities across the country. Analysts have not yet predicted when the amount of taxes paid by the Indochinese will exceed the amount of money spent for their resettlement. But the question clearly is not whether it will happen, but when and how soon.

Indochinese shed the label "refugee" at different rates, depending on where they came from and where they have settled. A balanced assessment of domestic resettlement will show that the ability of cities and towns to promote refugees' self-sufficiency varies as dramatically as the cultures of the refugees who are resettled there. Examples of successful resettlement should be proclaimed from the highest mountain for all to hear and be heartened.

A Slow Transition

. . . [T]he Hmong transition remains painfully slow. John Finck (a Hmong specialist for the Rhode Island Office of Refugee Resettlement) recalls taking a group of older Hmong from Providence to Plimoth Plantation—a reconstruction of a 17th-century Pilgrim village. The Hmong examined the chickens and the pigs, took samples of the herbs and affectionately rubbed the thatched-roof houses —not unlike the ones they left behind.

When they were about to leave, Soua Xai Thao, a small man with gray bristles poking from his leathery chin, leaned on his cane and asked Mr. Finck through an interpreter: "Can we move here and make this our home?"

Wall Street Journal
February 16, 1983